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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [UK](#) [AF](#) [EN](#)

SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN - ESTONIA'S MAIN FOREIGN MILITARY
MISSION PRIORITY

Classified By: DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Afghanistan is Estonia's main foreign military mission priority for the year. Its contribution to the UK-led PRT in Helmand (up to 150 troops) will be a huge commitment for this small country, the largest it has ever undertaken. In the run up to deployment of a company-size contingent of Estonian Defense Forces (EDF), a senior-level Estonian delegation visited Afghanistan (March 9-14) -- traveling to Kabul and Helmand -- to meet with UK counterparts and EDF soldiers already on the ground. In a series of debriefs MOD, EDF, MFA and the Prime Minister's diplomatic advisor all confirmed to us that the GOE is fully behind the mission, and is preparing contingencies in the eventuality of Estonian casualties in this challenging province. End Summary.

AFGHANISTAN: THE NUMBER ONE FOREIGN MISSION PRIORITY

¶2. (C) In the wake of a recent recce trip to Afghanistan, our Estonian military and civilian interlocutors tell us that participation in the UK-led Helmand PRT represents Estonia's main priority for both international military contributions in the GWOT and international development and reconstruction for 2006. When the UK assumes PRT leadership in May, the Estonians will gradually increase their commitments to a company size over the course of the year. The EDF will provide a number of niche capabilities ranging from an Explosives Ordnance Detonation (EOD) team, military observation team, a HUMINT team, and an infantry company serving alongside UK soldiers involved in poppy eradication.

¶3. (C) By participating in the Helmand PRT the Estonians have chosen to jump into the deep end of the pool. The GOE is under no illusions regarding the challenges and danger of the province. The GOE pushed for a two year mandate (2006-2008) for its military involvement in Afghanistan in order to ensure a long-term commitment in what will be difficult conditions. MFA Security Policy Director General Sander Soone told us on March 30 that the GOE is committed to Afghanistan's reconstruction and development. If the military commitment ends in 2008, Estonia would remain engaged with civilian-led assistance. While conveying real commitment and belief in the mission in Afghanistan, both Soone and MOD Desk Officer Taimar Peterkop conveyed that their ministries were sensitive to the wariness among Estonian politicians of long term, indeterminate involvement in Afghanistan without an exit strategy.

BRING IN THE CIVILIANS

¶4. (C) In Afghanistan, the Estonians were briefed by both U.S. and UK officers on the status of their respective PRTs. The Estonians were intrigued by what they understood as the contrast between U.S.-led PRTs, where the military took the lead, and the UK approach that put more emphasis on a civilian lead with the military and civilian agencies (the MFA, Ministry of Development, and Foreign Commonwealth Office) playing equal roles, and thereby diminishing the public perception of the PRT as a strictly military operation. (Comment. Though none of the Estonians explicitly said one method was better, some preferences were expressed: Peterkop expressed no opinion; Soone expressed real interest in the UK approach; and, while reserving judgment, Sillaste-Elling shared her reservations about an "avalanche of (civilian) advisors" that she feared the UK approach, with its emphasis on capacity-building, might engender. End Comment)

¶5. (C) Due to the small size of the GOE, the institutional inter-agency mechanisms put in place by the UK's approach is not practically relevant; but the PM's Office, MFA, and MOD were all on point in expressing the GOE's desire to carve out a larger role for civilians in Afghanistan. Since returning from Helmand, the MFA is in a "reflective period" on the scale, scope, and substance of the civilian component for Afghanistan. There are plans under consideration to try to send a police advisor in the second half of 2006 and/or an MFA or MOD policy advisor. Both the MFA and MOD have requested any assistance the U.S. could provide in this endeavor.

PREPARING FOR THE WORST

¶6. (C) In its coverage of Estonian foreign military operations, the Estonian media has focused primarily on Iraq. There is a real concern within the GOE that the public is not aware of the real security challenges and danger the Helmand PRT presents. The general feeling is not if there will be casualties, but when. In anticipation of such an eventuality, the PM's office, MFA, and MOD are working closely on an outreach strategy. The PM's office is also preparing a series of background briefings that will be released once Estonian troops begin to deploy.

¶7. (C) Estonia already has a complicated history in regards to Afghanistan as 50 Estonians were killed there fighting in the Red Army during the Soviet invasion. Due to the sensitivities from this history, the MFA's Soone said it was important to make clear to the Estonian public that the missions are completely different. While there are no concrete dates at the moment, the MFA will organize VIP visits similar to the PM's September 2005 visit to Baghdad. During that visit, EDF soldiers were able to convey their belief in the mission and explain their work. The MFA is fairly confident that the press coverage from any visit to Helmand will be equally positive.

A DESIRE FOR MORE RECOGNITION

¶8. (C) In light of its resources, Estonia punches well above its weight in the GWOT; however, the GOE perception is that recognition for its contributions has not been commensurate. Soone said that Estonia's contribution in Afghanistan will be equal in number to that of Lithuania, but fears that because it is not leading the PRT its role will not be seen as significant.

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